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The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Education

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The Importance of Play In Early Childhood Education

by

Cristie R. Ellison

May 2012

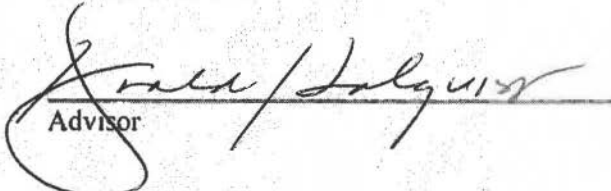
**A culminating project submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of
The College at Brockport, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in Education.**

The Importance of Play In Early Childhood Education

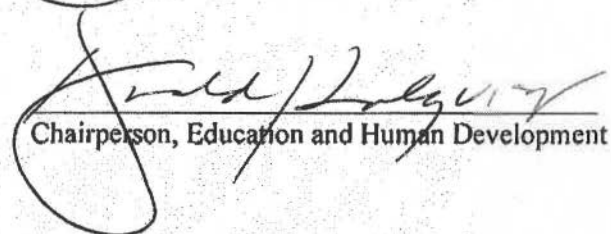
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a practitioner in the field of education, I have heard the phrase—"play is the work of the child." Although it can be simple to think of activities associated with play, such as children playing dress-up or building structures in the sand table, I believe that it is much more difficult to define play. According to Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005) defining play has been difficult among experts due to its unclear and inconsistent characteristics. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1975), there are 14 definitions for the word play. Play is defined as, but not limited to, where children put forth effort to occupy oneself in amusement, sport, or other recreation.

Even though there are many definitions for play, Curtis (1994) and Wardle (1987) refer to play as self-motivated, pleasurable, and not realistic. According to Armstrong (2011), "play is a dynamic ever-changing process that is multisensory, interactive, creative, and imaginative" (p. 2). Dockett and Perry (2007) define play as:

a particular attitude or approach to materials, behaviours and ideas and not the materials or activities or ideas themselves; play is a special mode of thinking and doing...Essential characteristics of play then, include the exercise of choice, non-literal approaches, multiple possible outcomes and acknowledgement of the competence of players. These characteristics apply to the processes of play, regardless of the content. (p.716)

Schwartz (2008) and Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) shared similar viewpoints about play, noting that even with all its complexities, play is something that all children take part in. There is not a separation of work and play for young children. Play is a part of children's daily lives.

Almon (2003) stated that play is a universal language that unites children worldwide. Although play may not look exactly the same from country to country, play is something that all children understand. Despite cultural and language differences in how children go about playing, these differences will not stand in the way of children playing together for hours. Xu (2010) stated, "Play is not only an enjoyable experience for young children but also a crucial way for children to learn about language...build social relationship and understandings" (p. 489).

According to Sutton-Smith (1997), developing criteria to define play is meaningless because they do not always represent play's broad and complex nature. Englebright (1996) and Xu (2010) shared a similar viewpoint that in spite of the complex and wide range of definitions of play the idea that play enhances children's learning and development seems to be widely accepted among early childhood teachers. Researchers, such as Ceglowski, (1997), Scarlett, Naudeau, Salonijs-Pasernak, and Ponte (2005) agreed that play helps children's development in the areas of physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth.

I believe that play comes in many forms and children participate in different forms of play depending upon their situation and individual needs. Different types of play take place within a rich environment that include associative play—playing with

others and sharing materials in an unorganized way; cooperative play—playing with others and sharing materials in a shared manner; solitary play—playing alone and manipulating materials to one’s own benefit; and parallel play—playing alongside another child, but not with the child (<http://www.sasked.gov>).

According to Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005), historically play and education have been interconnected especially from the period of enlightenment from the nineteenth century which will be explored further in chapter two. Play’s critical influence to children’s learning and development has been an essential practice in early childhood education. I believe that a play-based curriculum is the ideal practice for children in an educational setting. From my personal experiences, I believe that play is developmentally appropriate for children within an early childhood curriculum. In observing children, I found that children learn through their play and it is the style in which they prefer to learn. Therefore, if play is what is appropriate, and it is what children are hoping to partake in, then a play-based curriculum is what I believe is needed. For the purpose of this review, I use Armstrong’s (2011) definition of play that refers to play as a changing “process that is multisensory, interactive, creative, and imaginative” (p. 2).

In this chapter I focus on the statement of purpose, research question, problem statement, the significance of the study, definitions of terms and a summary of the remaining chapters.

Statement of Purpose

For this analytic review, I explored the subject of play within the early childhood classroom environment. The purposes of this analytic review were to: a) gain a more complete understanding of the functions of play in the early childhood setting; b) emphasize the importance of play for children's intellectual, emotional and social growth; and c) analyze a body of knowledge of developmental and cognitive theories pertaining to play in order to establish a basis for making decisions regarding the place of play in early childhood environments.

Research Question

What does the research say about play to guide the development of this analytic review?

Statement of the Problem

According to Nicolopoulou (2010) and Almon (2003), there has been much discussion about the amount of play that takes place in the classroom. In the last few years, one question has been whether or not to follow a play-based curriculum or a strictly academic curriculum. Warner (2008) stated that "many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them" (p.1). According to Ashiabi (2007), "Questions surrounding an educational and developmental usefulness have become prevalent in

recent years, in addition, to push for a more academic focus in early childhood settings” (p. 199).

With the push for academics, and in my opinion, it seems as though the emphasis on play has faded from the curriculum and replaced by a major focus on academics in the early childhood program. I believe that teachers have forgotten that the role of play is appropriate for children in the early childhood grades. Both Nicolopoulou (2010) and Englebright (1996) agree that young children learn to understand their world through play, exploration and imagination.

Significance of the Study

I teach in an urban school district in western New York, and in a school that implements a school-wide expeditionary learning initiative. According to Weinbaum, Gregory, Wilkie, Hirsch, and Fancsali, (1996), this initiative of learning challenges children to think critically and take active roles in their classrooms, and communities, resulting in higher achievement and greater engagement in school. Learning in this environment is active and meaningful.

As an urban educator, with five years in the field as a kindergarten teacher, my professional experience suggests that urban schools have a unique set of problems, including but not limited to, child’s play in the classroom environment. I am a teacher who seeks to use an alternative method to better understand and engage a group of young children in the educational process. I believe using an effective method to increase engagement may prove to be beneficial my students. I intend to

use my new found knowledge of play to better understand how young children learn through play and to implement child play strategies across the curriculum.

I approached this review from the perspectives of theorists in the field of psychology and education. I chose these areas because Piaget and Vygotsky were psychologists who wrote extensively about children's development and because education is my chosen profession, I am seeking additional knowledge in how best to work with the young children whom I teach.

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this analytic review, I used the theoretical frameworks of Piaget (1951) and Vygotsky (1978). I explored cognitive constructivism and social constructivism through the lens of Piaget and Vygotsky. I chose these theorists because of their contributions to child development and the field of education.

Piaget's theoretical cognitive framework originally came from the observations he made of his own children playing and learning. He thought in terms of an individual's learning by building concepts in memory to keep information.

According to Powell and Kalina (2009):

Piaget's main focus of constructivism has to do with the individual and how the individual constructs knowledge. Cognitive constructivism came directly from Piaget's work. Piaget's theory of cognitive development proposes that humans cannot be given information, which they immediately understand and use; instead, humans must

construct their own knowledge... Piaget's (1953) four stages are:
Sensorimotor stage, which a child goes through from ages zero to two;
preoperational stage—two to seven years old; concrete operational
stage—seven to eleven years old; and formal operational stage—
eleven years old to adulthood. (p. 242)

In the first stage, children learn about their environment. In the second stage, children are egocentric where they feel as though the world evolve around them. In the third stage, children begin to think more logically, and in the final stage, children think abstractly. As children move through Piaget's stages of development, they initially explore their world to construct knowledge through the use of their senses, by manipulating objects in their environment, and by bringing meaning to complex concepts in a rich environment under the supervision of the teacher (Kauser, 2010).

Vygotsky's theoretical framework centers on a child's social interactions. According to Powell & (write out the word) Kalina (2009), Vygotsky believed that social interactions are important during the stages of an individual development and that social interactions are the pathway for the development of a child's thinking. Vygotsky's theory of learning and teaching is based on a child's relationship formed through social experiences. Powell and Kalina (2009) referenced that:

Social constructivism is a highly effective method of teaching that all students can benefit from, since collaboration and social interaction are incorporated. This type of constructivism was formed after Piaget...described his theories involving individual or cognitive

constructivism. Vygotsky believed in social interaction...[which is] an integral part of learning. Social constructivism is based on the social interactions [of] a [child] in the classroom along with [other peers or adults].... Understanding his theories or building a classroom where interaction is prominent helps develop effective classrooms. (p. 243)

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development is also a major contribution to the body of education literature. According to Bartlett (2011), Vygotsky stressed that, "in the right environment, with the right guidance, children can perform [successfully]" (p. 28). For example, when a child is trying to count how many trains he has in order to share with all his friends, another more knowledge peer or adult who may be watching might notice that this child counted wrong. When noticing this, the more knowledgeable other could guide him in trying again by holding his finger and helping him count or redirecting him to double check. Therefore, having another person to work alongside the learner could help assist the learning process.

According to Powell and Kalina (2009), the term constructivism can bring about confused reactions from teachers because of their unfamiliarity of the term. When teachers are asked to use strategies in their classrooms, they may not know what to do. For teachers to be successful in using constructivism, they need to know about children's prior knowledge, so that when new information is taught children are able to master new knowledge. Teachers can only teach constructively if they are able understand the theory of constructivism.

Powell and Kalina (2009) believe that a teacher should use both cognitive and social constructivism because both methods can positively impact the children. Both cognitive and social constructivism will help children construct ideas from experiences that they partake in, which will in the end help to build meaningful knowledge. I will explore both Piaget's cognitive constructivism and Vygotsky's social constructivism in more details in chapter two.

Definition of Terms

<i>Play</i>	Play is a changing process that is interactive, creative and imaginative (Armstrong, 2011).
<i>Cognitive Constructivism</i>	Ideas constructed in individuals through a personal process (Kausar, 2010).
<i>Social Constructivism</i>	Social interactions of the child with another child or the teacher (Powell & Kalina, 2009).
<i>Early childhood</i>	Pre-kindergarten through second grade (RCSD Test, Evaluation Department, 2011)

Summary of Remaining Chapters

In the remaining chapters, I focus on the literature review and the discussion of play. In chapter two, I present aspects of the existing knowledge and current literature pertaining to play. This chapter includes the historical perspective and case studies in the literature. In chapter three, I discuss the limitations, recommendations and conclusions.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Childhood play has been a topic of interest throughout time. According to Almon (2003) and Saracho and Spodek (1995) the importance of play is supported by decades of research dating back to the nineteenth century when the Froebelian established kindergarten in his native Germany.

According to Weston (2000), Froebel opened his first early childhood institution for education in Germany in 1839. He called the institution—Play and Activity Institute. There were 50 children registered to attend the school. In 1840, Froebel renamed the institute Kindergarten. The word kindergarten can mean both garden of and garden for children. According to Weston (2000) and Saracho (2010), Froebel began the first kindergarten where play was implemented as a method in the educational process. Froebel used materials and activities, such as paper weaving and paper folding, songs, and games, in his kindergarten class to help children gain ideas and meanings he wanted them to understand (Platz & Arellano, 2011). Froebel viewed the early childhood experience as an important foundation in the child's education (Weston, 2000).

Play is viewed as a component of early childhood classrooms and is what gives children the freedom to express themselves (Fraser, 2006). Piaget and Vygotsky were two theorists who wrote extensively on the topic of child development, and therefore will be the theoretical frameworks incorporated in this analytic review.

Theorist – Jean Piaget

Piaget's cognitive development theory includes four stages of development (Powell & Kalina, 2009). The first stage is the sensorimotor stage. This stage occurs from birth to age two. During the sensorimotor stage, they also learn about their surroundings by using their senses. For example, a child who is playing with a ball and then drops it, to see that it bounces, will then realize that some things bounce, or when a child pushes a button on a toy and hears a noise, the realizes that a sound comes from that toy, which may motivate the child to push the button again.

The second stage is the preoperational stage that occurs between the ages of two to seven. During this particular stage, children are very egocentric. They do not see the points of view of others, but at the same time are beginning to develop their own language skills (Powel & Kalina, 2009). For example, when a child is viewing a toy landscape with a doll facing in one direction, which is different from her viewpoint, and then asked to describe what the doll sees, the child usually describes what she is looking at instead (Kausar, 2010).

The third stage is the concrete operational stage that occurs between the ages of seven to eleven. When children reach this stage in their development, they are now able to think logically and make sound judgments. Learning is more hands-on within this stage. Children are more exposed to activities that call for analytical thinking and problem solving, such as planning and conducting experiments (Kausar, 2010).

The final stage is the formal operational stage, which occurs from ages eleven to sixteen. Within this stage, children are now able to think more abstractly (Powell & Kalina, 2009). For example, when learning about plant survival, a child can hypothesize what she thinks will happen to the stage if it does not receive water.

Piaget considered play (Englebright, 1996) to be the path that children take to learn about their individual boundaries, at their own pace. Play is something that a child enjoys, and is reflective of a child's prior knowledge. Therefore, according to Piaget, the play that occurs is based on knowledge that children already possess. Powell and Kalina (2009) noted that the stages Piaget proposed are about how children learn at different ages based on what is developmentally appropriate for them. Xu (2010) stated that teachers should observe the children they work with and understand what level of difficulty they are working within, and build upon their strengths. Play is seen as a method of insightful development.

Whether children are practicing what they learned in other settings or are assembling new knowledge, it is clear that play has a valuable role in the early childhood classroom (Englebright, 1996). For example, a child who puts on an apron and uses the stove to pretend to cook a meal for his family—is using his knowledge of cooking to do so. Piaget felt that hands-on exploration of the real world helped children develop cognitively. Armstrong (2006) stated that Piaget considered a rich environment, to be the perfect setting for a child to explore and interact with as he or she went through the stages of development.

Theorist – Lev Vygotsky

Vygotsky believed that social interactions are crucial to learning (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Social interaction is where a child works with another child or adult. Vygotsky viewed children's play as a form of creativity that included the use of a child's imagination (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers, 2010). Play is a social activity that should be relevant to children's lives, engage their natural curiosity, and serve as a means that helps children reach their possible level (Xu, 2010). In other words, play should be something that children enjoy, and that is in connection to what they experienced within their lives. Play should spark an interest in the children for them to want to participate in it.

When interacting with more knowledgeable peers or adults, children can gain more knowledge through play. Vygotskian theory stresses that play serves as a natural context that helps strengthen cognitive development. Since play can be a collaborative activity, in which social interaction takes place, ideas will be shared, and thinking will develop (Powell & Kalina, 2009). During play activities children can practice what they know, while they learn new things. According to Vygotsky, children in the right setting, with the right set of directions can experience success through play (Bartlett, 2011). For example, a child who is playing with play-doh and mixes a piece of blue play-doh with a piece that is yellow, and discovers that it makes green, is then excited to share this new knowledge with her teacher.

Vygotsky (1978) is also known for the theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which he defined as the distance between actual developmental

level that is determined by independent problem solving compared to the potential problem solving in the presence of an adult or more knowledgeable peer. The ZPD increases for children as goals are accomplished and where more learning occurs (Kausar, 2010). In other words, as children learn more, their level of development increases. According to Xu (2010), Vygotsky believed that the adult or more knowledgeable peer was important in helping the child's experiences in his or her environment. When a more knowledgeable child or adult is there to provide support, the child's learning increases. For example, when a child is trying to put together a puzzle and is getting frustrated with the pieces not fitting together, the person with whom the child is working with could show her a strategy to remember when completing puzzles. Therefore, the next time this child attempts to complete a puzzle, she can apply her new found knowledge.

Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2011) state that adults modify their involvement in play to meet the needs of the child in specific situations during certain timeframes in her development, as indicated:

A situation in which adults can most effectively enhance play, from this perspective is when children are in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development – a time when children can play independent with just a little indirect guidance from an adult; a question, a hint, or subtle prompt. (p.112)

This might occur when a child is playing with sand. This particular child is trying to make a sand castle, but is getting frustrated that the sand keeps falling apart.

An adult, who is observing this trial and error, might ask the child what he thinks might happen if he added water to the sand. The child decides to test this idea out and finds that the water helps the sand to stick together.

Scaffolding is another part of the ZPD. Scaffolding refers to where and how the teacher provides support so that the child remains focused and on task to reach the next level of learning (Kausar, 2010). For example, if a child was counting the number of dolls in front of her and missed one, teacher guidance might redirect her to count the dolls again using one-to-one correspondence, which could lead the child to the correct response.

Teacher support plays an important role when it comes to learning (Kausar, 2010). Teachers act as facilitators in play. According to Englebright (1996), they do this in many ways that include ensuring that there is a proper environment for children to participate in while playing; by providing a safe environment with appropriate materials that will be of interest to the children; and providing safety rules that are understood by all children. Teachers should closely observe children as they are playing. This will help teachers to better understand the children they teach, as well as present itself as an opportunity to help with appropriate social interactions and behaviors. Powell and Kalina (2009), point out that the teacher has the responsibility to be there for children as a guide. The teacher should not be there to do the work for the children, but to serve as a guide to help support them as new learning occurs.

One activity that takes place in school where there is much social interaction is play. Vygotsky (1978) described play as the imaginary and dreamlike wants of

children through invented situations that were governed by rules. For example, a child pretending to be a police officer who stops the car driven by another child that was going too fast, and then asks to see the driver's license and registration would be practicing what she has previously learned about police officers. Rules are considered an important part of play because they help children to learn the conventions of social interaction and to develop self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978). The rules that a child may use to govern herself during play could be unique to the play, but could also apply to the child's real life experiences.

Piaget and Vygotsky use play as an important baseline in children's development (Kausar, 2010). Both Piaget and Vygotsky believed that children are active learners. They promoted methods of teaching that were inquiry based where children used their previous knowledge to build upon new knowledge (Powell & Kalina, 2009).

Benefits of Play

Academic Advantages

Play is known as the child's work (Ceglowski, 1997). According to Warner (2008), there is a relationship between play and academic success. As children play, they learn about the surrounding world by asking questions and testing ideas (Mastrangelo, 2009). According to Elkind (2008):

In infancy and early childhood, play is the activity through which children learn to recognize colors and shapes, tastes and sounds, the

very building blocks of reality. Play also provides pathways to love and social connection. Elementary school children use play to learn mutual respect, friendship, cooperation, and competition. Play is a means of exploring possible identities, as well as a way to blow off steam and stay fit. Even adults have the potential to unite play, love, and work, attaining the dynamic, joyful state. (p. 1)

When teachers provide rich environments that stimulate play experiences, young children's physical, social, moral, creative, and motor skills abilities are enhanced (Madray & Catalano, 2010). They have choice and control over what they choose to do, which allows for risk taking and increase in confidence. Children are empowered and take ownership in what they are doing. Their self-esteem then increases, based on the success they have while playing (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson & Rogers, 2010). Play is spontaneous and voluntary, where a child's imagination is able to explore many possibilities, strengthening their creativity (Mastrangelo, 2009). According to Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, and Rogers (2010), "Playfulness provides a way of looking at things from different perspectives rather than thinking of a problem as being something very hard to work out, or it is a way of coming up with different solutions" (p. 6).

According to Elkind (2008), "play is rapidly disappearing from our homes, our schools, and our neighborhoods. Over the last two decades alone, children have lost eight hours of free, unstructured, and spontaneous play a week," (p. 1). Children's collaboration helps the learning process. Play helps children expand social

skills while providing the groundwork for core academics, such as reading, writing and math (Hemphill, 2006). For example, when children fantasize and play make-believe, they strengthen their English, language arts understanding (Elkind, 2008), and when a children decide to play with Legos, board games, or cards they are reinforcing skills that are associated with math (Madray & Catalano, 2010).

According to Mastrangelo (2009), “symbolic play of children can serve to highlight language potentials and that play qualities are of higher predictive value than of IQ scores in assessing the prognosis of language development” (p. 38). Children learn to expand their vocabulary, develop sentences and become critical thinkers through their use of blocks, water play and manipulatives. This is so because when a child plays she is involved in communicating with others. Language thus increases as collaboration takes place. As a child plays, problems are sure to arise as well. For example, a tower keeps falling over when a child is building with blocks. When the child rearranges the order of the blocks to make the tower stand, she has used critical thinking in order to solve the problem (Mastrangelo, 2009).

Learners, Learning and Teaching Network (2004) conducted a small-scale qualitative study in Scotland that examined experiences and perspectives of child-centered and play-focused classes. The study involved six teachers and 49 children. The result revealed that play-based learning was interpreted differently by teachers. Play in some classrooms was peripheral rather than integral to the learning process. The size of the study proved to be a limitation, and applying a common definition to the term active learning.

In a longitudinal study conducted by High/Scope Educational Research Foundation (1962) that involved 123 high-risk African American children that were separated into two groups. One group was identified as the control group which was instructional based and the other group was identified as an experimental group which was play-based group. The results revealed that the participants in the experimental group obtained better academic performance than the control group. The limit included the study's sample size.

Social Advantages

Play has many social advantages. A teacher commented in an article written by Taylor, Samuelsson and Rogers (2008) that "Empowering children can be accomplished through play, and thus children use such powers to cope with everyday life, such as sharing toys with each other, conducting themselves as members of the group, and being away from their parents" (p. 5).

Mabry and Fucigna (2009) stated:

children's social play is one of the most important venues for learning in the early childhood classroom...it is through play with others, that they develop self-direction and self-control, an understanding of symbolic representation, fluency and communication and cooperation, problem-solving strategies, and an understanding of cultural rule and social behavior. (p. 49)

Humphreys and Smith (1987) cited a study that focused on rough and tumble play of children. The study examined the activity among 7 year olds (16 boys and 13 girls), 9 year olds (14 boys and 15 girls), and 11 year olds (18 boys and 18 girls). The children were videotaped in play on their school playground. The study's results revealed that the 11 year olds tended to choose partners who were similar in strength, but weaker than themselves; while not factor influenced 7 and 9 year olds. According to Humphreys and Smith (1987), the findings suggest that "rough and tumble performs an afflictive function in young children, although immediate motivation remains nonaggressive" (p. 201). The limitations of study include size of the study and the videotaped methodology that was used to gather information.

Logue and Detour (2011) cited a study that was conducted in a preschool classroom of a public university laboratory school in the northeastern United States that involved 12 children, 6 girls and 6 boys ranging in age from 3 to 4 and one half. The study focused on the children's decisions, actions, and interactions related to the bad guy play, as well as, teachers' reflections from field notes, meeting notes, and journals. The study revealed that:

children's pretend play can become complex; teachers' discomfort with certain play themes might inhibit play that could be valuable to children; children's pretending to act aggressively is not the same as acting aggressively; and play has a rhythm and structure that can be better understood through documentation and reflection. (p. 2)

The limitations of the study include its size and reliability, as there did not appear to be a process to determine inter-rater reliability.

Xu (2010) highlighted a study conducted on children's social play by Parten that was conducted in 1932:

Mildred Parten differentiated the social development of children into three levels. The first is non-social activity – unoccupied onlooker behaviour and solitary play. The second is parallel play, which is a limited form of social participation. Children play side-by-side with similar materials, but do not talk about the play activity. The third is true social interaction including two forms of play: associative play and cooperative play (p. 490).

Parten's three levels of classification of children's social play is still relevant and referred to today when describing young children's social play behavior (Xu, 2010). Although all young children may not necessarily follow the sequence of social play as defined by Parten due to "culturally, environmental and social changes since Parten's time may have an impact on children's social play behaviour and on how play behaviour has been interpreted at different times in addition to developmental factors (p.490)

According to Xu (2010), "due to the diversity of today's American children and their families, there is a need to reexamine Parten's developmental sequence of young children's social play in order to prepare developmental and cultural appropriate practice for today's children" (p.490).

Xu (2010) stated, "Developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive social play is an important vehicle through which this goal can be reached (p. 497).

Limiting children's play in favor of academics may hinder their development (Logue & Harvey, 2009). According to Bartlett (2011), Hirsh-Pasek, a psychology professor at Temple University, compared the move away from play to that of global warming when he stated, "it may take years for the consequences to be felt" (p. 28).

Conclusion

Dating back to the nineteenth century play has been considered an important role in children's lives. Despite the different theoretical viewpoints, teachers agree that the educational goal for young children is to help each individual child achieve his or her own fullest potential by providing a quality education for all children (Xu, 2010). Although there have been many studies conducted on the subject of play, I believe that there is still a need for additional research to show the significance of the development of a child in the relationship to play.

Chapter 3: Discussion

The purposes of this review were to a) gain a more complete understanding of the functions of play in early childhood settings; b) emphasize the importance of play for children's intellectual, emotional and social growth; and c) analyze a body of knowledge of developmental and cognitive theories pertaining to play in order to establish a basis for making decisions regarding the place of play in early childhood environments. The insights gained can be of benefit to me, and others in the field of education. I used the following research question to guide my exploration: What does the research say about children's play?

In my opinion, incorporating play in early childhood classrooms is an important factor to the development of the child. According to Englebright (1996), children learn best in environments that enable them to explore, discover, and play, something I strongly believe. Samuelsson and Carlsson, (2008), stated:

Play is also considered to be a practice initiated by children, while learning is seen as a result of a practice or activity initiated by an adult. In the context of early childhood education, play and learning are often separated in time as well as in space. Circle time, literacy hours, creative artwork etc. are seen as practices of teaching and instruction and thus the origin of learning, while play is put aside until leisure time or outdoor hours and it is part of children's own resort. At the same time, curricula of early years education around the world state that play is supposed to be of the utmost importance. (p. 121)

Lee (2010) stated that in an early childhood education setting, it is generally accepted that the very highest quality learning and teaching occur through play. I believe that play and learning should not be separate entities, but that play is an avenue in which learning can occur.

As I have highlighted previously, there are many forms of play. I believe teachers should set time aside during the school day for free spontaneous play—where children get a chance to play openly, as they please, within an environment that is rich and full of options, such as where children might: a) play restaurant, where they can learn to take turns, speak clearly, learn how to make up stories, and practice their writing all around the concepts and ideas that relate to reading a menu, ordering and preparing a meal; b) build with over 50 blocks and learn about balance and symmetry; c) play with dolls to show how they feel about their siblings—as this might help them work through their feelings; and d) put together puzzles to help strengthen spatial skills and develop an eye for details. Through these types of play much learning can occur.

Limitations

The studies cited in this review of the literature revealed limitations that include the of size studies (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1962; Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011; Parten, 1932). The second limitation includes the methodology used to gather information. In the study cited by Humphreys and Smith (1987) videotapes were used to capture the children at

play in a large playground setting. The use of video tapes may be a good idea for capturing what is able to be captured in the range of videotaping, but will not be a good idea for capturing child play for any activity outside of the range of videotaping. The video tapes do not assess how consistently children were tracked at long distances. This method lacks validity to assess the reliability of data collected by several observers.

Recommendations

Warner (2008) stated that children need playtime that is not overly programmed. Lee (2010) recognized that the curriculum needs to be designed to include play where children acquire a positive outlook for learning. Mastrangelo (2009) observed that a child's development improves if play becomes a fundamental element of each child's daily life (p. 43).

Through play, the child uses her experiences to find a way for self-expression and relaxation. I believe that in our society, where use of technology is growing and the academic demands are increasing, it seems that the opportunity for children to play is vanishing or in worst case scenarios has already disappeared.

In my opinion there is a pressing need to not only understand what play is, but also why it is so critical for child development. I believe that if play were recognized as the children's natural way of learning, there would be less of a tendency to insist that they are making inappropriate choices. Children need a chance to play out their experiences as well as opportunities to allow their curiosity and spontaneity to

flourish. I plan to incorporate the following ideas into my future teaching: 1) conducting observations of child's play in my classroom; 2) providing professional development to colleagues in my school; and 3) creating a brochure for families with the emphasis on child play.

Observations of Child Play

I plan to conduct observations of children at play where I collect data and outline key indicators of the children's progress during the play period. I will use the observation data to understand the children's interest and provide insight to the method that children learn. This data would be beneficial to me in strengthening my teaching style as I work with the children within my classroom.

Professional Development

I can help other colleagues at my school understand the importance of play. I will continue my research and update colleagues about the new body of knowledge that pertains to play. The data collected and themes that may surface can be shared with teachers at my grade level and at faculty workshops. With the support of the administration and my bargaining union, I can form and facilitate a collegial circle where colleagues can read and study about the social and academic aspects of play, and the positive influence that play has on learning, which they could then implement into their practice.

Brochure for Families

I will develop an informational pamphlet for parents that outlines age-appropriate play and key descriptors of what play looks like for kindergarten children. For example, playing with blocks, dress up, or working in a store. In addition, I can provide a seminar for parents about the importance of play. I can provide ideas for home use. I can invite families to school to observe the children in action to generate ideas the families can use at home.

Final Thoughts

As a practitioner, I believe that it is my responsibility to organize and create an environment rich in experiences that provide children with opportunities to grow, especially since the source of all that interests children is in connection with their environment. Therefore, I must provide suitable amounts of the familiar, as well as unfamiliar, materials so that the children will be challenged yet not overwhelmed. Ultimately, by focusing not only on what is being learned, but on how it is being learned, the freedom of the play-oriented classroom will help children develop values as well as skills.

I work in a school that uses an Expeditionary Learning design (Weinbaum, Gregory, Wilkie, Hirsch, & Cheri, 1996). The design includes engaging children in projects across the content areas, and an emphasis on a healthy school culture. The purpose of Expeditionary Learning is to develop children who are motivated to learn and complete challenging projects. The children in my school exhibit character traits

such as cooperation and good citizenship. The children are involved in learning expeditions that engage them in an experience that will support their self-value.

This style of teaching and learning includes play. For example in my classroom, the children engage in experiences that include: canoeing, hiking, team-building, roller skating, visits to museums, and trips to the zoo and farm. Through these events, my children experience fun and play that leads to learning.

The major goal in my school was to change into an Expeditionary Learning center where learning would take place through expeditions or journeys into the unknown. In these journeys, the teachers act as guides where children explore questions of importance. At the kindergarten level, this involves play-based activities such as imitating the adult world around them by playing school, store, house, or role playing adult work professions. According to Weinbaum, Gregory, Wilkie, Hirsch, and Cheri (1996), schools that employ the expeditionary model have resulted in significant academic in social growth.

I believe children need play and time of their own. According to Baines and Slutsky (2009), children need time to relax, to be creative, to interact, and to be energetic. Madray and Catalano (2010) stated that play is the child's work, and is "the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul" (p. 11). Finally, in my opinion, children need time to be children, and they need to be taught in a way that makes sense to them—through play!

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